

Trails and Tales of Old Austin and Travis County: Stillhouse Hollow's White Lightning!

This is an expanded post of my history article for the May 2018 issue of the Northwest Austin Civic Association (NWACA) newsletter (<http://nwaca.org/newsletter/>)

If you are an Americana music fan, you no doubt know of Gillian Welch's song "Tear my stillhouse down", a song bemoaning the vices of moonshine:

Put no stone at my head, no flowers on my tomb
No gold plated sign in a marble pillared room
The one thing I want when they lay me in the ground When I die, tear my stillhouse down!

Have you ever wondered about our Austin's Stillhouse Hollow and associated Stillhouse Hollow Nature Preserve: Where did the name "Stillhouse" come from?

Back in the day, Bull Creek was a world apart from Austin. Cedar, abundant in the valley of Bull Creek, proved an important livelihood for many, leading to the derisive label used by outsiders: "cedar choppers." From 1870 to 1940, cedar logs were in high demand in Austin and Travis County for railroad ties, foundation piers, stove wood, charcoal, and fence posts. And during prohibition, 1920-1933, the valley of Bull Creek provided the necessary ingredients for another livelihood, the production of moonshine: an abundance of spring water, charcoal made from cedar to fuel the stills, and most importantly, the solitude of the hills, valleys, and caves to hide production!

One such location offering all these key ingredients was our own Stillhouse Hollow, AKA Stillhouse Canyon.

Nest of Stills!

Headlines from an article in The American Statesman in 1923, proclaimed "Caves In Bull Creek Hills Furnish Safe Retreats For Moonshine Gangs; Officers Get Clue To Nest Of Stills." The article continues with: *"Capture of an alleged bootlegger and six gallons of 'white lightning' ... [which] led to the location of a veritable nest of illicit stills in the Bull Creek hills ... a vast quantity of Bull Creek moonshine finds its way into local [Austin] cellars ... [and bootlegging is now a profitable industry] ... of the Bull Creek 'hillbillies' ... One canyon which empties into Bull Creek northwest of Austin derived its name 'Stillhouse Canyon,' through having been many years ago the location of an illicit distillery. At the head of this canyon is a cave known to this day as 'Stillhouse Cave.' A gang of moonshiners is said to have prospered there until about sixty years ago, when federal revenue and state officers paid a surprise visit,*

which resulted in gun play and the annihilation of the illicit distillers."

Sounds like a line right out of George Jones' "White Lightning!"

Well, the "G" men, "T" men, revenueurs, too
Searchin' for the place where he made his brew
They were looking, tryin' to book him, but my pappy kept on cookin'
Whshh, white lightning!

Name dates to 1860s

So, the name "Stillhouse" dates back as far as the 1860s. Another article in The Austin Statesman from 1921 ran with the headlines "Stillhouse Springs Where Once Moonshine Outfit flourished. Ancients Spin Yarn. Tell of Battle With Federal Revenue Officers Staged 60 Years Ago".

That article includes: *"Three-score years ago Federal officers were busy [along Bull Creek trying to] locate the source from which certain residents of Austin ... were receiving their supply of moonshine ... They found Stillhouse Springs which to this day bear that name, and there, also, they found a still in operation in a sort of half-cave which is known ... as Stillhouse Cave ... This moonshine mixture was reputed to be triple-distilled and was guaranteed to have 'some kick'."*

Stillhouse Hollow is today a nature preserve with restricted access, but you can take a short hike out to an overlook via the trail entrance off Burney Drive at Sterling Drive. And as you stand there remember this line from an "old-timer" quoted in the 1921 article: *"It was about million-proof alcohol and when poured into a glass it looked as innocent as water [but make no mistake] in regard to Stillhouse moonshine, for it had a kick that would make a blaze-faced mule turn green with envy."*

That means it was good, I think?

References

The Austin Statesman, Spicewood Well Is Located on Romantic Spot, Nearby Flow Stillhouse Springs Where Once Moonshine Outfit Flourished, Ancients Spin Yarn, Tell of Battle With Federal Revenue Officers Staged 60 Years Ago. Oct 11, 1921, p.4

The Austin Statesman, Caves in Bull Creek Hills Furnish Safe Retreats for Moonshine Gangs; Officers Get Clue to Nest of Stills, Jan 14, 1923, p.10

Brune, Gunnar. *Springs of Texas, Volume 1*, 1981. The springs are listed with a brief description saying "... small Stillhouse Springs .. depicted on some early Army maps". Flow rates not given.

Roberts, Ken. *The Cedar Choppers: Life On the Edge of Nothing*, 2018. Great new book on an under covered topic; more stories about Stillhouse Hollow.

Stillhouse Hollow Nature Preserve is located at 7810 Sterling Dr., Austin, TX 78731.
<https://www.austinparks.org/parks/stillhouse-hollow-nature/>